



OUTDOORS

Auld Lang Syne

NEW YEAR'S EVE AT THE LONELIEST HOTEL IN CANADA

Story and photo by John D'Onofrio · Wednesday, December 28, 2011



The idea was to enjoy a little winter camping trip up at Birkenhead Lake, about 120 miles north of Vancouver in B.C.

We drove past Whistler and headed up into the north woods. The snow-covered Pemberton Valley was a glittering, frozen vision. We paused on the banks of the Lillooet River, frozen solid. There were tracks in the snow and the small signs of life only emphasized the silence and solitude. We walked along the frozen river, its surface a carpet of hoarfrost. Distant peaks seemed close enough to touch in the crystalline air. Hoo Boy, it was cold!

Truth be told, I love the cold: the clarity of the air, the stillness, the hard-edged landscapes. I've enjoyed my share of zero degree days out in the woods but this was different: it was 30 degrees below zero. Meteorologically speaking: damn cold. Holy Crap cold.

By the time we turned onto the Birkenhead Lake Road we were having second thoughts about camping. Third thoughts, even. So when we saw the Birkenhead Resort - a cluster of hunter's cabins huddled amongst the trees - we reconsidered our camping plans and pulled in.

We were the only visitors to the "resort", which was fortunate, as all but one of the cabins were out of commission due to burst pipes. Apparently it was cold, even for Birkenhead lake. We secured the one remaining cabin and hauled our gear inside. Even with the heater going full blast it was frigid in the tiny cabin. We turned the oven on, opened the door and huddled around it in down jackets. This was the life!

In the morning we strapped on our cross country skis and headed out along the lake. Within seconds, our eyelashes were iced up but as long as we kept moving, the cold was manageable. The woods were absolutely silent - no wind (thank God), no birds, certainly no other people. We climbed through the black trees, grateful for the heat of the effort. The sun shone brightly but its warmth was nothing more than a vicious rumor.

As evening fell we drove into the village of Pemberton and checked into the Pemberton Hotel, a classic bit of Canadian cinder-block architecture. The hotel was situated beside the railroad tracks, and each passing train shook the battered furniture in our cell-like cinder block room. The bathroom had not been sanitized for our protection.

It was New Years Eve and the locals were getting ready to celebrate in the hotel bar, funny hats and all. The juke box played music for dancing but nobody danced. Midnight came with the requisite honking of plastic horns - a strange and melancholy sound muffled by the cinder-block walls. Times Square had never seemed so far away.

Later, the horns fell silent and the music on the jukebox got lonely and sad. I missed my sweetie. On the way back up to my threadbare room, I passed an ancient-looking man in a battered cowboy hat in the hallway. As I opened the door to my room, he stopped as if he had something to tell me.

"Happy New Year," he said.